

Observations

by northernexposure

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****A/N:**** I don't think MissyHissy3 beta'd this one, as I don't mention it in the original A/N and I was usually pretty good at remembering to thank her when she didâ€| First posted May 2014.

****Original A/N:**** A sequel to 'Down Time'. Ayala finds himself in an odd situation.

* * *

><p>It was the end of a long shift. Actually, strictly speaking, the end of Mike Ayala's long shift should have been â€" well, about the span of an entire shift ago, but that was beside the point. Voyager had run into trouble with a hostile species called the Vaz-Elen, an encounter that had led to several pitched skirmishes and a whole heap of damage that was going to take plenty of time to repair. The ship was out of Vaz-Elen space now â€" and therefore out of immediate danger â€" but she'd been left with wounds aplenty. That he was still surrounded by emergency lighting and the intermittent fizz and hiss of damaged power lines was testament to the pounding _Voyager_ had taken. Part of him thought he should stay on for yet another shift, but exhaustion won out. Another ten minutes and he'd be asleep on his feet, and a crewman this tired was useless to everyone.

Sometimes, Mike thought, as he stood wearily waiting for the turbolift to take him back to his quarters, _being aboard _Voyager_

isn't that much different to being in the Maquis. Too many enemies, too few hands, too little sleep._

Still, it could be worse. At least when he finally made it back to his bunk in " what, five minutes' time? " he could replicate himself a hot meal and some of his own-recipe beer with the extra rations he'd won from his last game of pool with Tom Paris. That would never have happened in the Maquis. No holodeck, for a start. Although the fact that he may be too tired to even eat the food he could afford to replicate " yeah, that was pretty familiar.

The turbolift arrived and he stepped inside, shoulders so bowed he hardly even raised his head to acknowledge the other occupant.

"Deck seven," he muttered, just loud enough to push the computer into action. The familiar rush of the moving 'lift was almost enough to send him to sleep there and then.

"Good evening, Ayala."

Ayala jerked his head up at the sound of her voice. It was rough with a tiredness all its own, but still absolutely unmistakable.

"Captain! Sorry, I-"

She was waving a dismissive hand before he'd even had a chance to come to attention. "At ease, Lieutenant. You look as done in as I feel."

Janeway was leaning against the opposite wall, her shoulders braced against it as if she may otherwise slump to the floor. Her hair was in disarray. Her face was streaked with grime and so were her hands, which held a PADD against her chest. The captain's uniform looked to Ayala as if it was destined for the recycler the minute she had a chance to take it off. She'd obviously been in the thick of things " if not during the attacks, then certainly in the frantic aftermath of emergency repairs.

Ayala tried to suppress a smile, but failed. "Yes, Captain."

"Something funny, Lieutenant?"

"Ah " no ma'am. Not funny."

"What, then?"

He met her eye and smiled. "I don't know many Captains as willing to get their hands dirty as you are, ma'am."

"Knock it off with the ma'am, Lieutenant. The day's bad enough already."

"Aye" Captain."

Janeway raised the PADD to resume reading. He thought the conversation was over, until, with her eyes still fixed on the screen, she said, "So" Chakotay never got his hands dirty when he was your captain?"

"Oh, sure he did."

She looked up at him. "I thought you saidâ€|"

Ayala grinned. "Well, I guess you're just two of a kind, Captain."

She narrowed her eyes slightly, and he reigned in the grin, wondering if he'd been too familiar. They'd been on this ship together for four years, but he didn't know her â€" of course he didn't. She was the Captain. No one really knew her â€" apart, perhaps, from Tuvokâ€| and Chakotay.

Janeway seemed to be about to say something in reply, but she was interrupted by the sudden and total failure of the 'lift. It jammed itself to a halt so swiftly that they both lost their footing. The Captain stumbled, knocked to her knees as she automatically reached for her combadge. Ayala helped her back to her feet as she spoke.

"Janeway to Bridge. Report!"

"_Captain?"_ Chakotay's voice echoed into the dead lift. _"There's nothing new to report. No sign of hostiles and we're proceeding on course at warp four."_

The captain sighed and shut her eyes briefly, the fingers of one hand rubbing at her temple. Ayala could see the dirt crinkling around her crows' feet as she frowned. "Stand by, Chakotay." She raised her eyes to Ayala's.

"Deck seven," Mike said, speaking to the 'lift at her unspoken command. Nothing happened. "Deck seven," he tried, again. Still nothing. "Computer, damage report for turbolift two."

"_Turbolift two is currently non-operational. There has been a disruption in the power relays. The power relays in Turbolift two will require replacement prior to a return to full operation."_

"Dammit," Janeway swore. "Chakotay, did you hear that?"

"_I did,"_ Chakotay said, _"And I know what you're going to ask nextâ€|"_

Ayala saw Janeway's shoulders slump. "Don't tell me, you can't beam us out."

"_I'm afraid not. The transporters are off line until further notice. It looks as if the 'lift failed midway between decks 9 and 8, Captainâ€|"_

"â€|meaning there's no easy way out."

"_I'm sorry. We'll get you out of there just as soon as we can. Until thenâ€| try to make yourselves comfortable. Who is that there with you, Ayala?"_

"Yes."

"_Anyone else?"_

"No, Chakotay, it's just us."

There was a pause. _"Well, whatever you do, don't get him talking about the right way to make potato salad,"_ the first officer advised, deadpan, _"Or you'll die of boredom before we can get to you."_

"Oh, you-" Ayala began, before he could stop himself.

Janeway looked at him askance. "Potato salad?"

"_Don't do it, Captain,"_ Chakotay reminded her_. "Trust me, you'll regret it. Sit tight, we'll be with you as soon as we can."_

"Potato salad?" Janeway asked again, a touch of inquisitive humour alive in her voice.

"It'sâ€¦ just a private joke, Captain," Ayala said, shaking his head. "One that goes back literally years. I honestly can't believe he'd still wind me up about it. It was just this one time â€" just _one._ My wife Maria had reorganised the kitchen cupboards and bought all these new spice jars, so there was I rooting through them all, trying to find the cumin â€" because trust me, Captain, potato salad just isn't anything at all without a touch of cumin â€" but of course, the jars were all different and I was in a rush because we were late leaving and what I thought was the cumin turned out not to be cumin, so-"

He glanced up mid-flow to find the Captain watching him with open amusement and stopped, abruptly.

"Sorry," he said.

Janeway shook her head, still smiling, and eased herself down to the floor, leaning her back up against the wall with her legs outstretched. When he didn't do the same, she gestured for him to sit. "Might as well do as the man says and get comfortable, Ayala."

"Yes maâ€¦ Captain." Ayala mirrored her movements against the opposite wall. He had to admit it felt good to sit down.

"You've known the Commander a long time, haven't you?" she asked.

"We go back a long way, yeah," Mike smiled. "Chakotay's about as good a friend as anyone could wish for."

Janeway bent one leg, pulling it up to her chest and resting one elbow on her knee. "He must have been a good captain, too."

"He was. Most Maquis crews â€" well, they weren't always the best teams, you know? I still stand by the cause, but not everyone was in it for the right reasons. But Chakotayâ€¦ He's a good man, through and through, and he ran a good ship. I'd follow him anywhere." Ayala issued a short laugh. "Hell â€" I guess I did, right?"

Janeway smiled, though she wasn't looking at him and the gesture was restrained, overshadowed by something that Ayala thought was probably guilt. Ayala wasn't sure what to say into the pause, and so opted for silence, watching the woman opposite as her gaze remained fixed on an imaginary point on the floor. It was the first time since his climbing trip with Chakotay two weeks' earlier that Ayala had been in such close proximity to the captain, and he'd never had this much one-on-one time with her before. Now, knowing what he did about Chakotay's feelings for their commanding officer, Ayala regarded her with an altered eye. He'd always been aware of her strength of character, bravery and competence as a captain. Beyond that, he'd hardly considered. She was the captain. That she was a person in her own right was rarely something the rest of the crew was required to think about. But his best friend loved this woman, more than any other he had for a very long time. And that made her important, in turn, to Ayala, for reasons other than her right to issue him orders. Yet he knew nothing about her.

What was she like, as a person? What were her likes, her dislikes? Her pastimes? Ayala tried to imagine her, back in the Alpha Quadrant, accompanying Chakotay to one of their regular family barbecues. Would Kathryn Janeway find those enjoyable, or would she just endure them? Would Maria like her? Would she like Maria? The boys?

"Something the matter, Lieutenant?"

He'd been caught staring. Idiot. "Sorry, Captain. Just thinking."

Janeway frowned. "About what?"

"Permission to speak freely, Captain?"

She raised an eyebrow and nodded.

"No one blames you for the decision you made four years ago. Not any more, anyway."

Janeway blinked. "You'd better ask your wife if she agrees with that, Ayala."

"Maria? She understands. It's hard â€" but she understands. The Maquis â€" it was about preserving the rights of those colonists. Preserving their lives, their livelihoods, their families. How could we have been the ones to take away those rights from the Ocampa? That's Maria's outlook."

"She sounds like a pretty extraordinary woman."

"She is. You'd like her. And I think she'd like you."

The captain looked surprised. "Well," she said, "if there were ever an occasion for me to meet Maria, Lieutenant, I'd like to think you're right."

"I'm sure it will happen, Captain. When we get home," he added. "I mean, think of the parties, right? We'll all have a lot to celebrate."

Janeway laughed. Ayala watched as the gesture lit the captain's face,

despite the smudges of grime that marred it. Her blue eyes sparkled. "I would imagine there would be a lot, yes."

"There will be," Ayala said, gently.

"Yes," Janeway said, suddenly awkward. "There will be. There will be."

The silence drifted for a moment, filled with the accumulated doubt of four years.

"I " I have a picture. Of my family. If you'd like to see?"

Janeway smiled, wider this time. "Please. I'd love to."

Ayala unzipped his jacket, and then grimaced. "Um. This isn't exactly regulation " he said, as he pulled out the photograph.

The captain looked curious. "Where do you keep it? My uniform doesn't have inside pockets. Did you modify the replicator designs?"

"Not exactly " Ayala pulled the zip down further so that he could show her the small, envelope-flat pocket he'd sewn into his jacket himself. He shrugged. "I just needed them-

"-close to you," the captain finished for him, with a nod. "I understand, Lieutenant. Your secret is safe with me."

Ayala smiled. "Thank you, Captain." He passed her the picture. It had been taken at one of the last family gatherings before the Val Jean had left on that final, fateful journey. "The older boy is Alfie. He was five then, he's nine now. The little one " that's Thomas. He turned seven a couple of weeks ago. And that's Maria, with them."

Janeway looked at the picture, smiling. Maria had sent him more recent ones as soon as they'd made contact with the Alpha Quadrant, but this remained one of Ayala's favourites. As faulty and blurred as it was, he could remember the day so clearly " and he'd been a part of it, part of their lives in a way that he hadn't been able to be since. As he'd taken the picture, Maria had been trying to gather the boys into her arms, but as usual they were livewires, wriggling and laughing, more eager to enjoy the sun than they were to sit still for even a moment.

"What a lovely family," Janeway said, a twist of emotion in her voice that Ayala was unsure how to categorise. "Maria's very beautiful."

"She is. Beautiful and smart. I'm a lucky man."

Janeway frowned slightly, looking closer at the picture. Then she held it up so he could see. "Is that Chakotay?"

To the left of the picture was a blurred figure, apparently caught in the act of diving out of shot. Just visible were a dark head of hair and the faint lines of a tattoo. Mike smiled. "Yeah. He's part of the family, really. It was his fault the boys wouldn't sit still for the picture. He'd built them a boat and all they wanted to do that day

was get in it."

Something changed in Janeway's expression as she continued to stare at the image. "A boat?"

"Yeah, a miniature pirate boat - it had a mast and sail and everything, it was amazing. He was always making things for the kids, he's great with them."

Janeway sat back, holding the picture in one hand as the other rested against her cheek. "I can imagine that about him," she said, and Ayala was aware that her voice had grown subtly softer. "He made me the most beautiful things, too."

The look on her face a second after she'd let the words out of her mouth told Mike that she'd only meant to think them. A sudden flush tainted Janeway's cheeks, and she abruptly handed the photograph back and stood up, not meeting his eye.

I'm not the one holding back, Chakotay's voice echoed in his mind. _It's not going to happen while we're in command together, it's as simple as that._

Janeway paced back and forth for a moment, as if trying to escape an embarrassment Ayala wished he could assure her was unnecessary. Instead he tucked the photograph back into his jacket and zipped it up, busying himself to give her what privacy he could. Then he stood up, slowly.

"Captain," he said, "I don't want to speak out of turn, but--"

She kept her back to him, and he was cut off by the chirp of Janeway's combadge as Chakotay's voice burst into the air around them.

"_Chakotay to Captain Janeway._"

Ayala heard the breath she drew before she answered. "Go ahead, Commander."

"_Pleased to say the transporter's due to be up and running in the next few minutes. We'll have you out of there in no time._"

"Thank you. We'll be standing by."

A moment later, Janeway turned to face him. The flush had gone, replaced by the Captain's familiar steely resolve.

"Looks like our ordeal's over, Lieutenant."

"Yes, Captain."

"Not a moment too soon, either," she said. "I don't usually suffer with claustrophobia, butâ€|"

"Captainâ€|" He waited until she looked at him, and then smiled. He'd given up trying to imagine what the future might hold for himself and for his family â€" it was too painful to imagine their lives without him in it for any longer than the next hour or at most, the next day. But suddenlyâ€|

"I was just going to say, when we get home â€" _when_ we get home â€" I hope you'll be at our next family barbecue. You'll be very welcome."
"

She blinked and clasped her hands together, her fingers roving against each other, restless. "Iâ€" that's kind of you. Iâ€" She stopped, apparently struggling with something. Eventually, she said, "I hope I will be, too."

Mike nodded. He wanted to say more, but sensed that to do so would spell disaster.

"I'd offer to bring the potato salad," Janeway added, just before the tingle of the transporter overtook them. "But mine's probably worse than yours."

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